



Trans(ing) Body Art
Cutting Potential & Trans Embodied Labor

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Artikel

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- Cutting Potential & Trans Embodied Labor

By Storm Møller Madsen

This article examines how a number of trans-identified artists have turned to the genre of body art, using their bodies as the focal points of their work.¹ I am interested in the ways in which these artists are taking up a performance genre, which, historically, has placed itself within the battlefield of identity and body politics, and where questions of representation, subject formation, corporeality, and embodiment are integral parts of the performance work. Some of the artists working with what I call *trans body art* are: Cassils (CA), Zachary Drucker (US), boychild (US), Juli Apponen (SV/FI), Emmett Ramstad (US), Yve Laris Cohen (US) and the artists I, primarily, will engage with in this article: Kris Grey (US) and their piece *Homage* (2013/14/15) and the performance-duo Mars Hobrecker (CA) and Leah James (US) and their performance *Ritual (Marriage)* (2014/15). Despite having different artistic practices and backgrounds, the above-mentioned artists challenge subject/object relations and corporeal disciplining; in the performance situation and in relation to the performers' own bodies and identities. As I will show in the following, the works of trans body art are not simple body-political or identity-political statements. Grey, Hobrecker, and James as well as boychild, Cassils, and Drucker, among others, take up the work of body art, carrying its mantle into exciting topical and political directions that challenge normative expectations of trans bodies in performance as mere sources of surgery spectacles. They highlight the significance of the materiality of the body and utilize performance to ask questions about how corporeal matter matters and how it comes to matter; offering new meanings, imaginings, and conceptualization of corporeality and embodiment, furthering and expanding body art's potential to question and negotiate notions of biopolitical governance as well as embodied relationality and (un)becoming. The performances *Homage* and *Ritual (Marriage)* clearly align with classic dramaturgical strategies of body art; utilizing bodily explicitness, self-inflicted pain, endurance, and co-corporeal presence. I am interested in these classic strategies because they allow for clear parallels to be drawn to the overall genre of body art. But also because the literal nature of the puncturing, cutting open, and stitching of the skin, most explicitly relates to the opening of the body through surgery and can thus, through performative negotiation, offer a reworking of the narrative of "transitioned" embodiment, characterised by surgical incisions and hormonal therapy, still largely defining trans embodiment.

Thoughts on methodology

As I embark on my analysis it is my wish that the theory I employ continuously remains in dialogue with the pieces I engage. I analyze the chosen performances through a performative lens (as having a performative character), meaning I look for what they perform – i.e. what they do beyond the performance moment. I do not seek to reveal the work's immanent meaning (nor do

1) *Trans* refers to the self-determination for those who identify as trans. I employ trans as an inclusive categorization, involving claims of gender identity as related to corporeality and embodiment (Stryker, 2008, p.1). I understand trans, as including, but not limited to; non-binary, gender-queer, transsexual, transgender, transfeminine and transmasculine identities and presentations.

I believe such a thing exists). My readings are subjective and situated in my specific experience and embodied knowledge as a gender-non-binary person raised in Denmark and schooled in Theater and Performance Studies in both Danish and US-American-based traditions. I attended Hobrecker and James' performance of *Ritual (Marriage)* in 2015 in NYC, and where I have not yet had the privilege of witnessing Grey's *Homage* in person; I have had access to video and photo documentation of the performance.

I have chosen the performances for this article with attention to the way the artists place themselves within existing art and identity politics. To avoid claiming or defining the artists and their bodies through my writing, it has been important to select works/artist that explicitly claim an identity and body political agenda. As such the artists explicitly use their trans identity in, and when speaking of, their work.² I choose the selected performances with an awareness of the risk of demanding them to perform a certain subversive identity or body. To avoid this, I engage with the performances in close connection to the genre of body art and its argued potential for negotiating body and identity norms and classifications. I seek to understand what body art offers to this group of trans artists, and subsequently what new considerations they offer to the genre as well as to conceptualizations of the body in and as performance.

Trans-

I am interested in exploring a methodology for trans body art as connected to the notion of *trans-* (hyphenated) as a "term suspended in an implicit relationality" (Stryker, Currah, and Moore in Jones, 2016, p. 1) entailing "a broader sense of movement across, through, and perhaps beyond traditional classifications" (Hird, 2016, p. 231). I read trans- as importantly related to the genre of trans body art in its performative doing otherwise and its challenge to normative conceptions of identity and corporeality. Further, art historian Amelia Jones argues that trans- "signals *change*. As such trans- is intimately linked to the claims for performativity or performance" (Jones, 2016, p. 2, original italics) and how "performance *works*" (Ibid., p. 1, original italics). A fundamental argument for this article is, as such, that the trans body art works I engage relate to the notion of trans/- in two ways; firstly as body art, performed by individuals who identify as trans, emphasizing and negotiating corporeality and body politics. And following, as connected to a broader notion of trans- as "fluid and multipurpose, a mode of performing complex relationships between one site, identification or mode of speaking/doing/being and another" (Ibid., p. 2). As such, to think with the notion of trans- helps to explicate the performative potential of trans body art. As I look closer at the performances of Grey as well as Hobrecker and James, I examine what trans body art *does* and how the selected pieces foster a (re)imagining and (re)conceptualization of the ways we think about corporeality and embodied labor through performance.

Trans(ing) body art

Body art, also known as body based performance, live art, performance art, is coined as a specific type of embodied art practice, which presents itself in strong relation to an avant-garde politics of transgression and a postmodernist anti-Cartesian subject formation. It refuses theatrical and

2) For examples see: Grey, K. and Klein, J., 2016, "Trans*feminism: fragmenting and re-reading the history of art through a trans* perspective" in *Otherwise: imagining queer feminist art histories*. Ed. Jones, A. and Silver, E., Manchester University Press. James, Leah: <http://www.leahjamesart.com/about>. Hobrecker, Mars: <https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2017/7/28/meet-mars-hobrecker-trans-tattoo-artist-helping-queers-take-control-their-bodies> and <https://thepaceunderground.wordpress.com/2015/04/17/artist-of-the-month-mars-hobrecker/>.

representational conventions while utilizing temporal, spatial, and corporeal strategies of theater: Ephemerality, liveness, and bodily presence (Jones, 1998, p. 1). Body art “emphasizes the implication of the body (...) (with all of its apparent racial, sexual, gender, class, and other apparent or unconscious identifications)” (Ibid., p. 13, original parenthesis). Body and artwork are as such not separate – in fact, the (artist’s) body and its identifications are the very foundation of the work. According to feminist and performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan, bodily exposure is at the core of the performative potential of body art. Through explicitness and (literal or abstract) opening of the body, body art exposes the impossibility of corporeal wholeness as well as ultimate presence. It is not only a non-reproductive, anti-capitalist aesthetic strategy but also a performative *doing* of corporeal possibilities (Phelan, 1993, p. 167). As such, to read the performances in this article as body art means to recognize that the artists highlight their bodies as performatively imbedded in a broader social and political world, and to read the works as performances of corporeal negotiations and performatively invested in a corporeal otherwise.

The retrospective connotations of the title of Kris Grey’s performance *Homage* brings me to consider the performance as an aesthetic act of remembrance and respect. In an interview with AM DeBrincat following their performance at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, NY Grey explains how the piece was dedicated to US-American body artist Ron Athey, who also helped Grey insert the needles through their scars for the performance. Athey, who has worked within the genre of body-based performance since the early 1980s, continuously challenges and explores the pathologized subjectivity and body as an HIV-positive gay man, through both simple performance scores, often utilizing pain, and elaborate ritualistic performances. The temporal relation between *Homage* and Athey does not only function as a dedication of a single performance, it creates a lineage between Grey’s and Athey’s performances and art practices, highlighting a queer connectivity within the body art tradition, beyond their relation. Grey, in this way, cites and honors the vital work of queer and feminist body art, for imbuing (primarily cisgender queer and/or female) bodies with agency and using art to disrupt gendered (re)presentations, while further “transing” the project. Creating a double gesture of acknowledging the past, while generating and (re)imagining trans subjective, somatic as well as corporeal possibilities.

In reading the performances selected for this article, as well as the works of trans artists mentioned in the introduction, I see their performative potentials as reaching not only into the contemporary moment, but also into the historic connotations and the going assumptions for body art. Grey, Hobrecker, and James, as well as Drucker, Cassils, and boichild, among others, draw upon an already present tradition of transcestral creativity within the genre of body art, as they ask new questions of biopolitical governance and (trans) corporeal mattering.³

Unsettling orifices

New York-based artist Kris Grey’s performance *Homage* has a simple score: Grey stands naked on a small white platform stage, in front of a white wall panel between two large open windows. In true New York fashion, the remaining walls of the room have exposed brick. The room is small and filled with natural light, and the audience, which Grey is elevated above, sits in close proximity to Grey’s naked body. Over the duration of 45 minutes, Grey performs the simple act of removing ten

3) The transcestral relations within the body art tradition could be the topic of an article of its own. Despite not being the main scope of this article, the overall relations between past works of body art and works of James, Grey, and Hobrecker as well as Drucker, Cassils, Apponen, Cohen, and boichild, among others, are important to acknowledge and set the ground for reading the performances in this article.

hypodermic needles, inserted through their chest reconstruction scars, making thin lines of blood run down their naked torso. The audience remains quiet throughout the performance; so quiet you can hear the needles as they drop to the floor. Grey looks straight ahead. They only look down to remove a needle, then return to look ahead. They remain calm and focused even towards the end of the performance when their body is visibly trembling.⁴



Kris Grey performing Homage at Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, NY 2013. Photo: Fivel Rothberg.

The use of self-mutilation and body explicitness aligns Grey's performance with a tradition within body art that art historian Kathy O'Dell has called *masochistic performance*. According to O'Dell self-mutilation in masochistic performance works as an externalization of political pain; as a performative exposure of corporeal disciplining and challenge to the construction of certain corporealities as viable, true, or right (O'Dell, 1998, p. 77). The puncturing of the skin in performance disturbs the demand of maintaining corporeal wholeness and permanence, following Amelia Jones who states that "the more 'live' the woundings are, the harder it will be to disavow our own stake in maintaining our bodily boundaries against the threat of such putrid flows of blood, pus and liquid agony" (Jones, 2004, p. 139, original punctuation). The use of self-inflicted pain in *Homage* points to implications of corporeal disciplining on the trans body. The performative opening of Grey's body explicates the governing investment in maintaining their

4) I am for this analysis specifically focused on the performance of *Homage* Grey did at Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, NY in 2013.

corporeal boundaries and the pathologization of opening them, challenging the investment in unpuncturable and permanent corporeal materiality.

To open the body in performance is a play with the physical and political limits of corporeality. When Kris Grey talks about corporeal openings and the potential of performing them as a trans artist, they emphasize that for trans people: “The openings on our bodies are where the inside of us meets outside. They are the most policed sites on the body. Opening a new orifice on the body is a bold move and most certainly political” (Grey in DeBrincat, 2013). As Grey punctures their skin, they hone in on the policing of the body. They re-do an opening of orifices, their scars, that were first opened within the medical sphere, “without witness and under the rule of medicalization and pathology” (Ibid.). Grey, through performance, moves their body from the medical into the aesthetic realm and invites the audience to perform as their witnesses. They perform a re-opening which points to the policing, pathologizing, and bio-political disciplining of the trans body and its orifices, at the same time as it decenters the medicalized and pathologized narrative of their trans body and its corporeal changeability.

Cutting potentiality

Kathy O’Dell, in her engagement with masochistic performance, argues that the body is never simply present or real, and that body art through its corporeal openings, works to expose that the opposite is actually the case (O’Dell, 1997, p. 44). Through cutting open the body, masochistic performance exposes the foundational unreachability of the body, which cannot be known as a totalizable corporeal whole. To elaborate on this through trans body art, I turn to transgender studies scholar and transwoman Eva Hayward who engages with the surgical cut and its relation to the trans body, beyond absence and loss, but as an unleashing of potential and a reworking of the body’s boundaries. According to Hayward, the cut not only refashions the cut-part itself but the body as a whole, through the body’s continued relation to changeability (Hayward, 2008a, p. 255). Hayward’s theorizing is crucial to understanding the opening of the body, and the role it plays in *Homage*, but I depart from her as she theorizes specifically around the genital cut and the (male-to-female) transsexual body. I wish to allow *Homage* (and by extension trans body art) to extend Hayward’s theorizing beyond the surgical cut, to consider how the cutting open of the body in *Homage* can be understood as literalizing as well as externalizing the potentialities of trans embodied labor.

As Grey opens their body they perform a manifestation of the intrinsic relation between the trans body and corporeal changeability as “at once its subject, its substance, and its limit” (Hayward, 2008b p. 74). I turn to professor of rhetoric Gayle Salamon who through the lens of trans embodiment challenges the understanding of a coherent and easily accessible subject-body relation and rethinks the body’s material reality. Salamon questions assumptions about what it means to have a body, be a (material) body as well as the certainty and cognitive accessibility of sex, gender, and identity, stating: “difference, distance and otherness are at the heart of the ego and the body” (Salamon, 2013, p. 14). Salamon emphasizes, like Hayward, the cut as a place of process and changeability and argues that for the trans subject, the cut should be understood as a “process of embodiment, a continual becoming, rather than one act that begins and ends with a surgery” (Ibid., pp. 116–17). To cut open the body can thus be understood as a corporeal negotiation of changeability and *Homage* as performing an externalization of this process of embodiment, and a negotiation of corporeal materiality. Grey’s re-opening of their body suggests that the cut is not an outsider to the body it is *of* the body: A negotiation of corporeal changeability and an act of becoming. A corporeal labor we might think of as a willed materialization *with* the cut, not because of it.



Kris Grey performing Homage at Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, NY 2013. Photo: Fivel Rothberg.

Stillness & trans-corporeography

Homage is 45 minutes of insistent stillness and bodily exposure. At the center of the performance is Grey's naked body: They have beard studs on their chin, a flat chest with long horizontal scars below their nipples, through which the ten hypodermic needles are inserted. As they remove the needles, most of the blood streams gather in the crevices of their vulva. Grey performs an insistence on bodily materiality, a performance strategy, which according to Amelia Jones "raises the question of the 'real'" (Jones, 1998, p. 33, original punctuation): Exposing the body's failure to perform absolute realness; pointing to its very impossibility. Grey's exposure of their scars and more profoundly the exposure of the genitalia alongside the scars misalign Grey's body with the two-sex binary. Grey's exposure performs as a failure to pass within this binary and a refusal to submit to the demand of terminal transition from "female" to "male".

Grey, through stillness and exposure, points towards other ways to think of transition and trans embodied labor – separate from narratives and demands of linearity, passing, and "realness".

Although Grey's performance does not last more than 45 minutes, the pain endurance draws attention to the duration and stillness of the piece, especially towards the end of the performance where Grey is most visibly in pain. Performance studies scholar Jean Vaccaro highlights stillness as a manifestation of what "we can think of as enough" (Vaccaro, 2010, p. 258). Stillness in performance furthermore has the important quality of pointing to other forms of embodied labor, as Vaccaro argues: "Stillness is not oppositional to the movement (...) indeed, we can observe stillness in movement and movement in stillness, particularly by recognizing multiple forms of embodied labor – cellular, felt, and so on" (Ibid., pp. 258-259). In relation to the labor of trans embodiment and corporeality, Vaccaro goes on to ask: "What, for example, is the cellular labor of transition? Can we think surgical and hormonal transition without succumbing to additive logics, and instead characterize the lengthening, thinning and deepening of body parts, skin, hair and voice as a labor of distribution?" (Ibid., p. 255). Vaccaro's question is answered with a call to regard a labor of transitioning that validates lengthening, thinning, and deepening of corporeality. Her call does not look for ends (like the two-sex binary demand of terminal transition) but forefronts continual doings, distributions, and processes of corporeal changeability and becoming. Vaccaro, on the basis of Vicki Kirby's notion of *corporeography*, goes on to coin the term *trans-corporeography* which allows me to further think about processes of corporeal labor that are, not necessarily, bound up on intervention. She writes:

I conceive of the body in composition with itself, engaged in an autonomous process and choreographic labor, and foreground transformation or transformative processes that are not the result of intervention. Instead, I map transgender embodiment as a set of relations among movement, speed, expansion and excess (Vaccaro, 2010, p. 255).

Vaccaro engages the term trans-corporeography as a way to consider corporeal transformation, movement, and labor not limited to intervention. As such the stillness of *Homage* forefronts Grey's corporeal labor, not limited to their surgery scars. It proposes an extended understanding and recognition of their corporeal doing and embodiment, (trans embodied labor) as a being in continuous composition with oneself.

Cutting, plucking...trans laboring

To think deeper with the proposed notions of trans embodied labor and broaden the potentials of thinking with the "cut" in relation to trans embodiment, I want to differentiate the means and ways to think with the cut. To do so, I turn to the work of American transgender multimedia artist Zachary Drucker and Canadian gender non-conforming trans masculine visual artist Cassils.

In Zachary Drucker's performance *The Inability to Be Looked at and the Horror of Nothing to See* (2008/2009), the audience steps into a small room: In front of them lays Drucker on a metal operating table wearing nothing but underpants. Her eyes are closed and she has a shiny metal ball in her mouth. As the audience approaches and gathers around Drucker, a speak starts, asking the audience to pick up tweezers and pluck body hair from Drucker's body. The next 15 minutes are filled with collective plucking as the speak leads the audience through a ceremony-like performance containing breathing exercises, vision making, and chanting. Towards the end of the performance the audience is asked to unanimously chant: "Despite all efforts to become a woman, she will be doomed to a life as a man" (Rehm, 2009). Drucker never once moves or shows signs of pain or emotion. Reading Drucker's performance alongside *Homage* shows an alignment of strategies that performatively move the trans body from the medical realm into the aesthetic – exemplified

by the hypodermic needles in *Homage* as well as the surgery table in *The Inability*. Where Grey performs alone in front of a silent, witnessing audience, Drucker's audiences are active participants in her quotidian body modification. To regard Drucker's performance in relation to Grey's also foregrounds corporeal labor: A labor that is performed outside a medical sphere and with an active refusal to be in hiding and alone – flipping the policing and overexposure (yet invisibility) of the trans body in the performative moment, as a demand to be witnessed in the corporeal doing and changeability. The act of plucking body hair in *The Inability* proposes a differentiation of the notion of the “cut”: No longer tied to a medical sphere, hair plucking as a quotidian, private ritual of corporeal labor can be regarded as a trans cut; as a negotiation of corporeal changeability. Drucker's performance is a performative manifesting of body hair removal performed as a cutting, reworking, and doing of the body: Trans embodied labor.

Cassils' work *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011-2013) also places the component of temporality and corporeal changeability at the core of the work. Over a period of 23 weeks, Cassils followed a specially designed diet and workout plan in order to accumulate 23 pounds of muscle, documenting this durational performance with photographs. Like Drucker's, Cassils' performance offers a differentiation of the cut. Assistant professor of film and literary studies Eliza Steinbock argues that Cassils' work “supplants the cuts of gender affirming surgeries with extreme training for a “cut” muscularity, including a very low dosage of steroids” (Steinbock, 2014, p. 254, original punctuation). Cassils' performance cites Eleanor Antin's iconic work *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) where Antin over a week and a half reduced her food intake, documenting her body's change with photography as it was carved into a shape conforming to classical female body ideals. Steinbock argues, “the violent tone of “carving” that Cassils borrows in *Cuts* carries a transgender resonance” (Steinbock, 2014, p. 254, original punctuation).⁵ But where a popular notion of trans embodiment involves corporeal carving as a crossing from one sex to another through surgical intervention and hormone therapy accomplished in the event of a “sex change”, Cassils performs trans as “a continual becoming, a process-oriented way of being that works in a space of indeterminacy, spasm and slipperiness” (Cassils, 2013). Utilizing the cut as a carving of trans corporeality Cassils performs what Amelia Jones has called “radical indeterminacy” (Jones 2016, p.93): The cut as a labor of trans embodiment, not a transitioning labor, but a doing of continuous corporeal becoming in radical indeterminacy. To expand on this I turn to the collective cut in Mars Hobrecker and Leah James' *Ritual (Marriage)*.

The performativity of puncturing the skin

In *Ritual (Marriage)* the performance score, again, is simple. Mars Hobrecker and Leah James enter a dimly lit black box room. They wear white garbs and flowers and tulle in their hair. Their faces are powdered pale white, cheeks red. They sit down on a small blanket center stage. Hobrecker opens a small glass bottle of disinfectant, pours the liquid over their forearms, and together they gently spread the disinfectant over each other's skin. The scent spreads in the air. From a small leather purse, Hobrecker pulls out a needle and thread. Firmly holding Leah's hand he starts sewing his arm to hers. Slowly he cuts through her skin and then his, connecting their arms from wrist to elbow. Throughout the performance, the audience is quiet, except for small squeaks and occasional whispers.

5) Like Grey, Cassils performance' retrospective connotations point towards the above-mentioned transcestral creativity within the genre of body art.



Leah James & Mars Hobrecker performing Ritual (Marriage). Photo: Tinker Coalescing.

I turn to the ritual as a way to anchor the performative potential of *Ritual (Marriage)*. Hobrecker and James perform a literal blood bond titled with reference to the marriage ritual, famously asserted by professor of linguistics J.L. Austin to work as a performative, which in its “I do” *does* something beyond its utterance (Butler, 1993, p. 224). Extended by philosopher Jacques Derrida, who argued for the general performativity of language, this laid ground for understanding reiteration and citation as foundational for the upholding of binary formations of gender and sex via Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (Ibid., pp. 224–225). As Hobrecker and James perform an abstraction of the marriage ritual, they reclaim the reiterative force of performativity to assign certain meaning to bodies, i.e. create certain forms corporeality and embodiment as viable. They call upon the ritual’s performative power to *do* a co-corporeal bond we can understand to extend beyond the performance moment. By taking up the performativity of the marriage ritual, they point to the reiterative powers of normative performatives, which constitute and uphold certain versions of gender, subjecthood, corporeality, and even matter.

In their corporeal stitching, they embody the “I do”, moving its reiterative power from language

to corporeality. Hobrecker and James perform a reconfiguring of their bodies in alignment with Amelia Jones' argument that "Body art (...) does not *illustrate* (...) rather, it *enacts* or *performs* or *instantiates* the embodiment and intertwining of self and other" (Jones, 1998, p. 38). Body art not only shows us corporeality or embodiment; it *does*. When Hobrecker and James sew themselves together it is an act of collective corporeal becoming and a performative negotiation of embodiment as contingent upon exchange.

Ritual (Marriage) was performed numerous times throughout 2014 and 2015. As such the corporeal puncturing of the skin of *Ritual (Marriage)* can be read as a collective corporeal doing, which does not begin or end with a singular performance of connecting bodies. *Ritual (Marriage)* offers a literal, yet abstract opening of the body, one that opens and, at the same time, proposes a healing through stitching the body together (note here together in its double meaning). Hobrecker and James take up the needle and thread in an act of hurt and healing as they perform a re-arranging of their corporeality and corporeal limits. In the press material for *Ritual (Marriage)* at LaMaMa's Squirts in 2015 the performance is framed as follows: "[They] take instruments that have historically been used by institutions to dissect and quantify to instead create bonds that will bring queer bodies closer together, and test the limits of the physical form" (La MaMa's Squirts, 2015). As I argued in relation to Grey, Drucker, and Cassils, the tools of corporeal disciplining are, in *Ritual (Marriage)* too, reclaimed to reimagine corporeal and embodied possibilities. The needle and thread perform as medical tools but, in the intimate space of the performance, they also connote quotidian tools of (female) handmade labor, craft, collective process, and quotidian aesthetics. Jean Vaccaro thinks critically with the notion of the "handmade" and "crafting" in relation to trans corporeality and embodiment. In her reading of transgender studies alongside craft studies she highlights the effects of engaging trans identity and embodiment within the realm of the aesthetic, as she states: "The emphasis on craft, performance and visual culture de-centers the psychiatrist, surgeon, social worker, and lawyer in trans discourses, and privileges the individually collective labor of transgressing normative gender" (Vaccaro 2010, p. 257). Decentering linear or finite transitions to make room for considering conditions of emergence and how transition is measured and defined. Vaccaro goes on: "By speaking of "crafting" transgender identity, I mean to highlight the felt labor and traces of making and unmaking identity and the performative doing of gender becoming in relation to the materiality of the flesh." (Vaccaro, 2015, p. 275, original punctuation). The notion of crafting emphasizes quotidian but also collective labor of making and unmaking identity and the handmaking of corporeal materiality as well as gendered and embodied becoming, highlighting "the force of the hand (rather than the diagnosis) in the worked on, textured, sensory, and amateur labor of making identity in the everyday" (Ibid., p. 276). The crafty nature of the needle and thread becomes a testament to the quotidian and amateurish becoming, crafting, and doing of trans embodiment. The cut I found manifested in the carving, plucking, and still lengthening of corporeality is now differentiated further in *Ritual (Marriage)* as a collective crafting and handmaking of trans embodiment.



Leah James & Mars Hobrecker performing Ritual (Marriage). Photo: Tinker Coalescing.

A fleshy reach

Hobrecker and James perform a literal intertwining of their bodies we might consider an act of intercorporeality. Professor of philosophy Gail Weiss states: “To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies” (Weiss, 1998, p. 5). Philosopher of phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty places the body in an intertwined, interdependent, mutable relationship to the world. Using his notion of *flesh*, he states: “the world is at the heart of our flesh” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 137). The “external world” is, according to Merleau-Ponty, not so external at all – it is in us, as we are in it – it is a part of – it is – our flesh. Gayle Salamon takes up Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh as “that which, by virtue of psychic investment and worldly engagement, we form our bodies into, rather than the stuff that forms them” (Salamon, 2013, p. 64). According to Salamon, it is through fleshy investments that our bodies come to be, about which she states: “To feel one’s own flesh, or to act as witness to another’s, is to unsettle the question of subject and object (...) in the service of a more livable embodiment” (Ibid., p. 65). If we form our bodies by psychic investment and worldly engagement in the flesh,

Hobrecker and James' co-opening of their bodies might be considered an abstraction of a reaching towards, or an activation of, the flesh. Conceptualized as feeling the flesh and witnessing the other's flesh, their stitching becomes a collective agential reach towards a more livable embodiment (not limited to transitional finitude or linearity). As such their fleshy reach becomes a co-corporeal labor of healing with and through the "other". Hobrecker and James perform a mutual separation and togetherness in their collective fleshy reach. They literalize bodies as relationally becoming, a becoming I consider as a trans corporeal labor; as collective corporeal composition through fleshy reachings. They create bonds that bring their bodies closer together and position crafty, quotidian, and collective corporeal becoming as integral to trans embodied labor.

Cutting differentiation

Mars Hobrecker and Leah James, as well as Kris Grey, Zachary Drucker, and Cassils literally and figuratively perform and constitute new boundaries for their corporeal materiality. They perform a reworking of their bodies' materialities, which can be read as always-already there, as it proposes new possibilities for corporeality extending beyond the singular performance moment. I employ the term "always-already" to describe an inherence to specific notions of corporeal matter and embodied experiences. The term is derived from Martin Heidegger, as a statement of essence, but I employ it as read through feminist theorist and new materialist thinker Karen Barad, by which it becomes a term employed to open considerations of how unacknowledged structures of corporeal changeability was indeed always(-already) there (Barad, 2015, p. 406).

Continuing to read with Barad, I push my reading of the cut further in a consideration of the ways the cut acts as simultaneously trans corporeal labor of possibility and a performative doing within radical indeterminacy and collectivity, but also as can be thought to literalize and question (the cutting of) constitutive differences and exclusions of (the entanglement of) matter.

Barad argues that matter is "not the given, the unchangeable, the bare facts of nature" (Barad, 2015, p. 411). For Barad all matter is entangled and thus inseparable (Barad, 2007, p. 67) and differentiation happens through what Barad calls the *agential cut*, about which she states: "The boundaries and properties of component parts of the phenomenon become determinate only in the enactment of an agential cut delineating the 'measured object' from the 'measuring agent'" (Barad, 2007, p. 337, original punctuation). As such differentiation is not given but performative, and happens through an agential cut by which difference, dichotomies, and classifications are created. The cut is *the* act of division and of creating difference; it is not absolute and essential but enacted and performative.

Since cuts are understood to be enacted rather than given (it is the cut that makes the individual and not the other way around) all manner of questions regarding the nature of mattering come together here – that is, questions of matter in the multiple senses of meaning, being, and valuing (Barad in Kleinmann, 2012, p. 77).

Thinking with Barad's agential cut, I propose to consider how trans body art points to the "cutting" of exclusions, differences, and classifications and their governing force. Trans body art asks which cuts form (corporeal) matter; i.e. how it comes to matter, and what exclusions and limitations these cuts entail for the possibilities of bodies, beings, and becomings of matter.

Ending remarks

Homage and *Ritual (Marriage)*, as well as *The Inability* and *Cuts*, are performances of trans embodied labor, which move the cutting of the trans body from a medical into the aesthetic, political, and quotidian realm. In a refusal to stay unpuncturable and determinable they create performative manifestations of trans corporeality and embodiment as continuous, crafty, collective, and nonlinear. The cut becomes a performance methodology that cut apart, in a willed action of trans embodiment, to disturb the disciplining of the trans body, as it simultaneously exposes the cut misconstructions of ontological differences and binary classifications of corporeal matter.

Trans body art exposes and challenges material cuts and performs new imaginings of corporeal matter(ing) and embodied labor. The works expose the workings of biopolitical disciplining on the trans body, and show differentiated forms of the cut as a performative challenge to the corporeal demand to be “fixed”, “whole”, and “done”. Eva Hayward argues that for the trans body; “*The cut is possibility*” (Hayward, 2008a, p. 255, original italics). By employing the performance methodology of the cut, trans body art performs corporeal doing as (re)imaginings of the possibilities of trans corporeal materialization: Through performance, they literalize mattering relations of corporeality and embodiment, asking for an expansion of how we consider corporeal matter, embodiment, and the process of mattering.

It is my hope that I, by examining the corporeal and performative potentials of trans body art, have offered insights on the potential of, as well as a methodology for, engaging with expanded notions corporeality and embodiment; as well as the role the aesthetic and especially performance, can play in engaging these. I believe that performance, in its discursive and performative staging of matter, holds a great potential for questioning, exploring, and disturbing how corporeal matter comes to matter in, through, and as performance. These questions should, in my opinion, be at the forefront of our investigations; most definitely, but not solely, when considering questions of queer, crip, gender, and racialization in and as performance.

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